ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE E7
NEW YORK TIMES
9 March 1986

Battle-Weary Contras Await Reinforcements

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TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS

As President Reagan leaned on Congress last week to back increased American involvement in the guerrilla war in Nicaragua, the insurgent army the Administration hopes will topple the commandantes in Managua languished in Honduras, apparently no longer a match for the Sandinista troops.

In Washington, beseeching Congress with rhetoric, Mr. Reagan and his aides sought $100 million for the rebels, $70 million of it in military aid. Mr. Reagan said the choice was one of supporting him or the Communists. Responding to the Administration's campaign, Representative Michael D. Barnes, a Maryland Democrat, said the President and his assistants were committing "the moral equivalent of McCarthyism." By the end of the week, five House committees had voted on the aid, and the score was 4-1 against the President. A vote of the full House is scheduled March 19.

Here in the region itself, it is clear that there are several reasons for the rebels' decline. Some of them seem serious enough to make resuscitating the guerrillas a long and difficult operation with no guarantee of success. Western diplomats estimate that, given substantial aid and time for training, it could take the rebels as long as two years to become an effective force.

Among the handful of anti-Sandinista forces operating out of Honduras and Costa Rica, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force based in Honduras is by far the largest and strongest. Before Congress cut off military aid in mid-1984, the rebels, numbering perhaps 8,000 to 10,000, bloodied the Sandinistas in forays across almost a third of Nicaragua. The Administration now charges that ending the arms supply is the main reason the rebels stumbled. But their problems appear to have begun before the cutoff and to involve more than a mere bullet shortage.

One of the paradoxes of Nicaragua is that support for the revolution, both inside and outside the country, is diluted by strong and probably growing discontent with the Sandinista Government. But somehow this does not translate into support for the American-backed guerrillas.

"If the Sandinistas just disappeared or were defeated by a mass internal uprising, almost every government in Latin America would give a great sigh of relief," said a Western European ambassador. But virtually no foreign government, despite its misgivings about the Sandinistas, has been willing to join the United States in open support of the no-longer-secret anti-Sandinista war.

And Nicaraguans inside and outside the country remain strongly divided over whether to back the guerrillas. The rebels' origins help account for their uncertain appeal. Washington turned to the defeated Nicaraguan National Guard, which had served the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Contract agents of the Central Intelligence Agency and Argentine army officers who had set up government death squads in their own country became the guerrillas' trainers, according to American and Honduran officials.

Support From Peasants

Despite their notoriety, the former guardsmen initially found surprising support among conservative peasants in northern Nicaragua. But the illiterate peasants and their commanders offered no coherent political program to replace the Sandinistas. Even worse, the rebels often killed or brutalized Sandinista soldiers and Government officials they had captured.

In a conflict whose success depended on winning public support, the C.I.A. made things worse by giving the guerrillas a manual that instructed them to assassinate Sandinista officials and hire criminals for especially dirty work. Before long, the Sandinistas had ample evidence to wage a devastating propaganda war, a campaign from which the insurgents have never really recovered.

It is uncertain what the guerrillas would have achieved if their supply of weapons had not been cut off. They had gained significant support in some rural areas, enough to drive the Sandinistas to forcibly relocate tens of thousands of peasants who backed the rebels. But the guerrillas' popular support did not appear to extend beyond isolated rural areas, and the Sandinistas rapidly improved their tactics and weaponry. A rebel offensive failed last summer, and they then opened a new front in Southern Nicaragua, where there are infrequent skirmishes. Elsewhere, the contras are on the defensive and clashes with the Sandinista troops are rare.

The guerrillas do not have the weapons to reply to the rockets, artillery and helicopter gunships now in the hands of the Sandinistas, supplied by Cuba and the Soviet Union. And unlike the haphazard Somoza regime, the Sandinistas have a Cuban-trained police force that weeds out rebel supporters with daunting efficiency. Since most basic products are rationed in Nicaragua, the guerrillas cannot equip themselves inside the country but must maintain long, vulnerable supply lines from Honduras.

The rebels have compounded their troubles by waging a war of large units instead of breaking into small patrols to hit the Sandinistas and run. They have also chosen to attack politically sensitive targets, including coffee pickers, agricultural cooperatives and civilian Government officials whom many Nicaraguans do not consider legitimate targets of war.

Until now, the rebels supported by Washington have not been a serious threat to the Sandinista Government. They could pose such a threat, if they could gather support from the growing internal opposition to the Government. But to do so, it seems, they will not only have to become a better-armed and better-trained force. They will also have to develop a more humane image and a genuinely popular political program.

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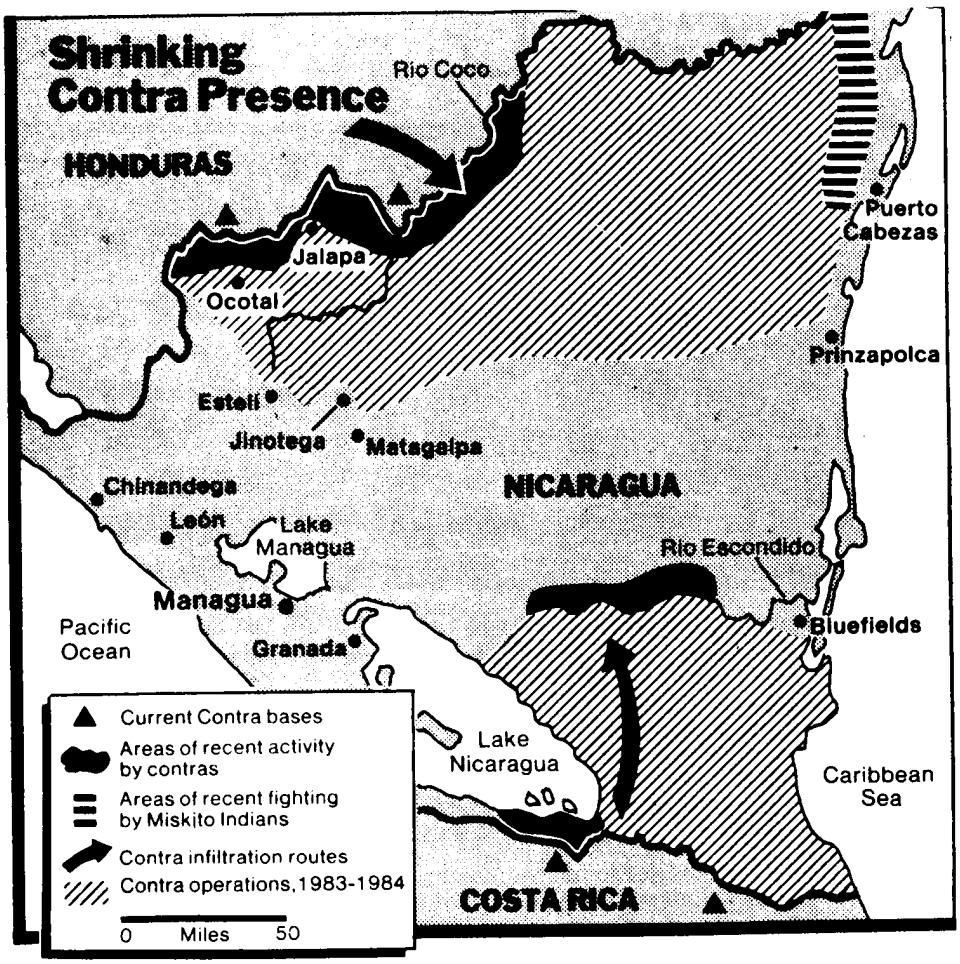

Anti-Sandinista guerrillas training in Nicaragua near the Honduran border in September.